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The 'Dirty Americans':

A View From Red China

By HANS KONINGSBERGER

PEKING — China has variously been called an iceberg with only its peak showing or an ocean with only the surface visible. I have no pretentions to have fathomed its depths. I can only present, with many reservations, how these men and women in the street, and in factories and offices, in a handful of the biggest cities, seem to feel about the world around them and, specifically, about the war in Viet Nam.

In the realm of foreign affairs, Viet Nam is well nigh the only topic; with every foreign visitor, private or official, it is an immediate touchstone of his attitudes; it is the steady five-or six column headline on the front page of the People's Daily, the official newspaper; it is the main subject of government advertising.

In these ads, noble-looking groups of people of all races, profiles tilted toward the horizon, and clutching rifles or hand grenades, are taking a stand against "imperialism." The text informs us so; very rarely do they actually show American soldiers attacking or being attacked. And some of the posters, featuring curvy and very pretty girls with glossy black hair, clutching Tommy guns, could have come straight from Madison Avenue; oddly enough, in some subtle way they seem to use sex in selling their message.

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People Are Concerned

But are "the people" really concerned. Is the Peking government really worried, or is Viet Nam a godsend which they would have invented if it hadn't been there? As with most questions about China, the answers are "yes and no."

The people surely are concerned. "Imperialism" is no empty politician's phrase here; with whomever I had some kind of halfway serious conversation it had a most precise meaning. And avoiding all the talk about class struggle, capitalism, communism and revisionism, I think this meaning may be summed up effectively as follows: "Imperialism is white soldiers in Asia (or Africa)".

White Troops Hated

Both the town people, including any lukewarm intellectuals, and the peasants (made aware of the world for the first time in their history) accept this definition easily and as it were, instinctively.

To the average Chinese, now and long before Mao Tse-tung was ever heard of, no case can ever be made for the presence of white troops in his part of the world.

Because of this, the vast audiences of the new "revolutionary operas" and revolutionary movies, political cabarets and theater plays, which forever use themes from World War II and the Chinese civil war following it, easily accept the Americans, advisers and helpers of the Chaing Kai-shek government as the "bad guys," rather than the Japanese, the great despoilers of China of those years.

This is not simply a matter of no choice. I have talked to actors and actresses who had toured the West and who discussed this in sophisticated terms which would not have been out of place in the office of an American show business agent.

The war with Japan was an incident in history; the enmity of the whites is a lasting historical truth to them.

Belligerent Nursery Songs

I found this concept of "imperialism" to hold, too, with other Asians.

Because this angle of "race war" hits men so hard and evokes such deep and irrational emotions, the Chinese people are indeed deeply involved, without the need for their government to do more than keep the issue in the news.

Yet, that being said, I think that the Chinese, like everyone else, is not really interested in foreign politics—not interested the way he is interested in his life, work, family, and prospects.

The way the Chinese government is handling these feelings of the people is a complex matter, too. Like most westerners, I was shocked by hearing nursery tots sing about their determination to shoot down American planes.

A French student friend of mine who, without asking, photographed some children in Hanchow (something the Chinese hate), had little boys scream at him, "Dirty American — why don't you go back to Formosa?"

But attention should be drawn to an important element in these processes of "thought molding" which makes them rather different from what, for instance, the Hitler youth was put through. The striking difference, to me, seems to be that whereas Hitler was mentally preparing a generation for aggressive war, the Chinese government, as of now, seems to provide a substitute for war.

Substitute for War

This is not necessarily a matter of morality; it is practical politics. The point is, that if China were as great a power as it is in the image projected for its people by the government, it might have gone to war quite a while ago, and it would have had enough support from the population in such a venture.

It is no such power; and its leaders are surely aware of the fact that the American Air Force could destroy in an hour all that has been put together so slowly and wearily during the last 15 years.

And thus all these demonstrations and resolutions seem not to prepare, but to substitute, for war, to gloss over the government's actual inactivity.

The point that "Viet Nam" provides the Chinese government with an issue needed to keep the people hard at work, has little visible reality. The Chinese people do work hard (though not as hard as most western experts think), and have done so through most of their history, whenever they got a halfway decent break from their rulers in terms of food, clothing, and "pride." But, in a deeper sense, there is substance to the idea that American policies, willy-nilly, provide a most useful challenge.

Spiritual Isolation

The China of 1965 tries to be a sober, intense, and puritanic society. Rather than saying it is Communist and contrast it with western capitalism, a more useful juxtaposition may be given by saying that in China various disciplinary and "steering" forces and rules have been given the regulating tasks in daily life which, in the west, are performed by economic laws and by money as a regulating agent. Such a moneyless, profit-less, society would function best in isolation. And in that sense, the political isolation which the United States has imposed on this country since 1950 (and the Russians since 1959) paradoxically created a favorable climate for the drastic government reforms and actions.

It is a spiritual isolation as total as anything seen in China since Marco Polo; and, almost pathetically, not even the so warmly praised North Vietnamese seem quite on the Chinese side of the fence. Even now, the North Vietnamese still talk of China with that somewhat patronizing self-assurance one finds among Poles discussing the Soviet Union. In the end, to the Chinese they are foreigners like all of us.

Traveling from Nanking to Hangchow, I had to change trains in Shanghai, which involved an hour's wait at the station. Foreigners in transit have to stay in special rooms at the stations—to them, each town is like a new country for which a visa is needed. That particular hour I spent in the transit room with a group of North Vietnamese students. They took their confinement with more grace than I; they smiled, shrugged, and within a few minutes they had a bridge game going. And as we were sitting there, stared at by some children from the doorway, we all equally seemed intruders in this vast, self-centered, defiantly proud, unloved country.